



CONTEXTUALISING THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INITIATIVES IN GOOD GOVERNANCE: A REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

In India, the use of social media for governance is being increasingly recognized. The universally relevant and accepted features and the political dimensions of good governance are about nurturing a healthy society. Governance requires the exercise of legitimate political power by the designated bodies, in a manner that should be equitable, non-discriminatory, socially sensitive, participatory and above all accountable to the people at large.

The theory of communicative action reaffirms the fundamental importance of civil society's role in determining government's priorities. Understanding this, is essential to any understanding prospects for change in governance. Public spheres do not exist in a vacuum. There can be no framework between the civil society and the state if there is no state.

The availability of constantly improving technological solutions coupled with innovative managerial tools have given rise to scope and options for improved administrative structures, efficient and effective public service delivery systems and the highest quality of governance. Governments and governance the world over have undergone a 'paradigm shift' in their traditional roles and structures of inflexible control and procedure and orientation, towards result orientation, flexibility, facilitation and citizen-centric approach.

The present study explores the adaptation of social media for good governance beginning from the initiatives of the government in the erstwhile planning commission in India with a special focus on the twelfth plan. The study examined the social media platforms of the Delhi Traffic Police, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, Tihar Jail, India Post and the Census' facebook and twitter pages. The strategies adopted by the government institutions and bodies, to engage the citizens by making their websites user-friendly and understanding the challenges of interacting online with the citizens were the key highlights of this study.

The power of social media in initiating government schemes, policies and to make communication inclusive and participatory, is widely recognized today. And the biggest reason for this is that a common man's view can reach millions today in matter of seconds. While the Government institutions and bodies devise new ways to reach out to the last person in the last village, social media and online initiatives remain one of the key ways of engaging 'wired' citizens.

KEY WORDS: Accountability, Citizen-centric, Governance, Inclusive, Participation, Social Media, Transparency.

INTRODUCTION:

In India, governance has been characterised by poor economic governance with continuous fiscal imbalances; disparate growth across different regions, basic needs such as food, water and shelter, not addressed for a significant part of the population, lack of security, safety and maintenance of law and order, isolation and perpetuation of violence.

Governance in India has been plagued by lack of accountability, absence of need-based or relevant formulation of schemes, programmes and implementation, high degree of corruption at various levels, absence of simple grievance redressal mechanisms, lack of transparency in dealings, complicated procedures which take too long and are very cumbersome, lack of sensitivity on the part of the government, marked by slow, delayed or even total lack of responsiveness. In India, poor governance is a major cause of poverty (Ravi & Chandrashekar 2009).

Quality of governance is increasingly being recognized as among the primary factors behind the most remarkable development successes of human history. Governance requires the exercise of legitimate political power by the designated bodies, in a manner that should be equitable, non-discriminatory, socially sensitive, participatory and above all accountable to the people at large. These are generic, universally relevant and accepted features of good governance. In other words, the political dimensions of good governance are about nurturing a healthy society (World Bank 2000).

The argument that tools needed for technical solutions to governance challenges are deficit is no longer valid. The tool box is overflowing but the difficulties arise when attempts are made to apply technical solutions under real conditions. If there is a correct alignment of citizens, stakeholders and public opinion, reforms can succeed.

Jurgen Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action reaffirms the fundamental importance of civil society's role in determining government's priorities. Understanding this is essential to any understanding prospects for change in governance. Public spheres do not exist in a vacuum. There can be no framework between the civil society and the state if there is no state.

Studies of communication and political development adopted a purview that was broad in certain ways. One finds analysis of political, social and economic

changes over time in relation to one another using complex theoretical frameworks. The diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers 1962, 1983) in communication circumvented communities and citizens during program planning and in most of the tactical planning and implementation phases of development projects. Communication scholars, field practitioners and non-governmental organisations moved steadily away from this diffusion paradigm of development between 1970 and the turn of the century and advocated sustainable and participatory paradigms for development. Instead of "top-down" development communication planning advocates of the sustainable and participatory approaches pursued "bottom-up" planning. Communication processes of this participatory paradigm shifted from having an emphasis on message design to having an emphasis on dialogue between stakeholders.

Much of this work has been inspired by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Friere (1968, 1973).

Many scholars profess the view that communities and citizens should be centrally involved in program planning whenever possible because they are more likely to understand relevant traditional knowledge and local past practices. In other words, they know things. Communities and citizens should be involved not only as program beneficiaries but also as program partners. A key element of these insights is the recognition that participation is precisely voice (Odugbemi & Jacobson 2008). It goes beyond narrow technical consultations between specialists and beyond periodic citizen plebiscites. Stiglitz (1998) argues that participatory processes must entail open dialogue and broadly civic engagement, and it requires that individuals have a voice in the decisions that affect them. Terms like voice and good governance earn their value only when participatory and governance processes yield hard fought gains. But change is underway. To accommodate this change, the criteria of democratic legitimation must be fulfilled which is the fundamental goal of governance reform and transparency. The legitimacy of democratic governments can be established only when governmental priorities, processes and outcomes are transparent, meaning they are open to citizen scrutiny and evaluation.

How do citizens actually provide input to the government?

This participation does not refer simply to voting. Participation must engage the citizens in a dialogic communication.

From a media and communications perspective, the recent technological changes have completely changed the way media institutions are publicizing information and making public services more responsive to the people. More recently, the internet, the greatest inventions in technology has changed the way the world thinks and behaves today.

The dawn of high-speed internet technology gave birth to a new approach that helps users to better utilize their time and attention to create a rich, personalized and social media environment. It recognizes that users increasingly have access to a two-way communication infrastructure. Social media didn't start with the computer. It was born on "line"—on the phone.

Technology continued to break new grounds and advanced in leaps and bounds. The second coming of the web, with Orkut, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, et al changed the way we communicate. Web 2.0 has created communication at the speed of thought. The efficiency that is achieved by this real-time thought exchange has been leveraged across nations, sectors, peoples. New information and communication technologies often equated with the west in the past have become widespread and permeated into areas where not only global but local issues are being tackled. Openness, transparency, collaboration have become the key words in a democracy. The social network and other online mechanisms are promoting greater accountability from those in positions of power.

Despite a plethora of delivery mechanisms, most governments are increasingly perceived as unresponsive, with no covert accountability systems and mere lip service to transparency. It is by now an accepted fact that traditional government structures and systems are no longer adequate to meet the demands of the rising citizen aspirations and challenges of complex global economies. The role of the government established and accepted earlier as the 'sole provider' is being questioned in every forum. The availability of constantly improving technological solutions coupled with innovative managerial tools have given rise to scope and options for improved administrative structures, efficient and effective public service delivery systems and the highest quality of governance. Governments and governance the world over have undergone a 'paradigm shift' in their traditional roles and structures of inflexible control and procedure and orientation, towards result orientation, flexibility, facilitation and citizen-centric approach (Karwal 2000).

West Asia presently witnessed extra-ordinary changes as a result of a highly mobilised electronic activity of the disillusioned people. The upper estate is being held accountable by the 'fifth estate', the social media. In India, civil society's battle against corruption acquired its sharpest edge when thousands of college students, executives and housewives joined a campaign demanding from the government to enact a new law. At the centre of the movement was social activist Anna Hazare who stressed the importance of a completely transparent and participatory process with the inclusion of citizens in drafting the law against corruption. Between ten to twenty lakh people supported the campaign. The revolution in Egypt facilitated by social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter also caught up in India and it has become a formidable face on the social media landscape.

Why not then leverage this advantage in delivery and governance?

The new generation that is born 'digital' are the biggest consumers of social media and they are defining the actual nature and creating very profound challenges to power. The governments have now understood that societies are rapidly moving towards attitudinal and behavioural changes and how this trend is having a debilitating effect on them.

There are no institutional standards for the delivery of public service. Therefore, there always appears to be an unending struggle between the government systems, its capability to deliver and the actual needs of the citizens. Going by the typical definition of democracy, i.e., 'government of the people, for the people and by the people', democratic India certainly seems to have fulfilled the tenets of a government 'by the people'. Though having recognised the need for the people and place the common requirements and aspirations of the people on the highest priority for service delivery, progressive governments have found that the governing process itself comes in the way of their attempts to establish a positive relationship with its citizens. For the citizens any encounter with the government was a harrowing experience. Be it a visit to the police station for registering an FIR, or to the respective authorities for obtaining a permission/license/certificate, or a visit to the government hospitals or government educational institutions—the procedures were so lengthy and the number of officials and their attitudes so complicated that the citizen remained a dissatisfied, frustrated consumer. The earlier governments managed to crawl through but now with the dawning of the information age and the emerging knowledge regime, the citizen is no longer satisfied with the services which can be delivered only by frequent visits to the government offices, or standing for hours in long queues or after consuming lengthy processes or with the evil but necessary associations with touts and middle men. Citizens want fast and efficient systems available at a single window that do not require them to know the faces and names of bureaucratic structures but give them a feeling about being a part and interacting with the government. Based on this, it is pertinent to point that in a macro context, democracies feature various communication technologies in which citizens are allowed into public spaces. In the policy and advocacy circles, forms of interactive media were advocated in

India. The e-government initiatives were critiqued for non-interactive features. It was realised that e-governance is not just the mere application of information and communication technology to government functioning. Initially, most e-governance efforts concentrated on data collection, data exhibition on websites and there was negligible element of organisational transformation and change.

To introduce interactivity as a means to finding solutions in which public officials and citizens participate together many government agencies are proactively pursuing their visibility on various platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn etc. The official account of Public Diplomacy Division of Ministry of External Affairs, India, was able to reach out and evacuate Indian nationals from Libya. Government departments and Ministries are using social media in service, in delivery, in registering complaints, in disaster management etc. The erstwhile Planning Commission, Municipal Corporation of Delhi, Tihar Jail, National Knowledge Commission, Educational Institutions are just few organisations which have made their presence felt on social media.

Based on this premise, the paper aims to make understand how social media can make the process of policy planning inclusive and participatory. It explores and gives us an understanding by reflecting on the of the strategies of the Planning Commissions in adopting online initiatives with respect to the 12th Five-Year-Plan as a starting point in good governance. It also gives a critical over-view of the challenges and limitations faced by the government with specific reference to the use of social media for governance.

The erstwhile Planning commission, at that point in time, used the Facebook platform and connected to the wired citizens by posing questions on Urban Governance Reforms under the sub topic "Managing Urbanisation" See figure here below:



Figure 1.1 (Managing Urbanisation)

How did these government institutions engage themselves? The media strategy employed by them focussed on posing questions on Facebook at regular intervals (twice a day) and inputs were sought around 'notes' on specific problems posted and relevant organisations were tagged to increase reach. Also, weekly polls were conducted on the website to understand what the audience were thinking. The planning commission had a vision statement which was a People's Plan which was inclusive and participatory. This helped the commission to garner recommendations, ideas and suggestions on key development challenges and public policy issues, redesigning existing schemes and policies and architecting new schemes and policies. The choice of media depended on a combination of factors. The social media platforms like facebook and twitter looked into the quantitative and qualitative reach of Indian users. The age-group of active users of social media platforms ranged between 18-44 years and the different stakeholders were specialized agencies, think tanks, policy makers, ministries, government bodies/ departments, academicians , academic institutions and international audiences.

To increase the outreach the government bodies made an endeavour to make their websites user-friendly and gave daily updates to engage with the viewers. The insights from some government bodies can be seen below in Figures below:

Insights from Other Agencies' FB Pages and Twitter Accounts

Planning Commission's *raison-d'être*

- Inclusion and Participation in the Planning Process

Municipal Corporation of Delhi's Facebook Page

- Motivation is 'Service Delivery'
- People can track 'redressal rate' of complaints

Delhi Traffic Police's Facebook Page

- Again, motivation is 'Service Delivery'
- Improvement in Management of Traffic
- Communicating people's problems to Signal Agencies (Chowkies)
- Online campaigns directly addressing citizen's complaints and demands

India Post's Twitter Account

- Direct influence on Delivery
 - Addressing questions about Status of posts etc
- #### Census 2011's Facebook Page
- Motivating citizens to share information in the process of data collection
 - Requesting them to cooperate with the enumerators
 - Direct involvement in Census 2011

Figure 1.2

(Face bookpages and Twitter Accounts of PC, MCD, DTP & India Post in 2011)

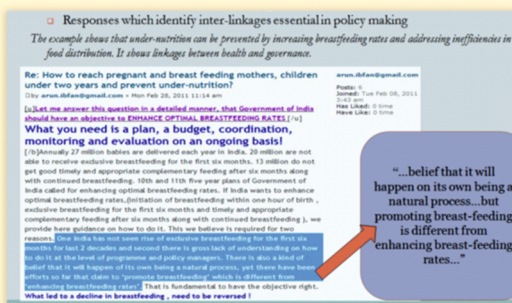


Figure 1.3

(Responses identifying Inter-linkages essential in policy making)

Measuring Results Against Objectives

Quantitative

Facebook: Number of 'likes' (3,514), 'unlikes' (47) and comments
Website: Number of users- 1,601; Number of hits- > 9 lakhs

Qualitative

Richness and Diversity in Comments

- ✓ Comments that pose uni-dimensional solutions
Rain water harvesting only solution to water crisis' (30 of 37 comments)
- ✓ Working models: Suggestions to tackle specific issues

A case on ASHAs in Tripura

Kamali Hajander The need of health awareness is known to all. The government machinery at the grassroot level has to be enhanced. ASHA workers should be given regular job or their honorarium should be linked. Here in Tripura their enthusiasm has decreased as they fall to find fee back out of the job. I saw training programs for ASHA (staffs) are not that resourceful. Even after undergoing several training modules, many find lack of concept.

Yesterday at 7:25am · Like · 43 · 1 person

Figure 1.4

(Measuring Results Against Objectives)

Information Management

- ✓ Citizens' inputs and comments analyzed on a daily basis; responses sorted and filtered to bring out varied inter-linkages
- ✓ Content sent to Challenge Teams and Commission Members working on the 12th Plan



Figure 1.5

(Information management done on citizens' inputs on daily basis)

Some of the challenges faced by the government bodies entailed language which essentially centred English initially, have been to a large extent overcome it due to advancements in technology and their adaptability to almost all social media platforms and the willingness to explore ways to work in regional languages. Another challenge was integrating the inputs which was at a variance with the officials' perceptions which was a potential challenge.

CONCLUSION:

While 'Social Media in Governance' is certainly the fancier avatar of 'Participation and Inclusion', the process was essentially enriched by inputs received from Stakeholder's Consultations. These consultations were organized by the Planning Commission and government bodies in collaboration with Civil Society Groups to reach those who are 'not connected'- voices which are an absolute necessity if the process of Participation and Inclusion is to be completed.

Nation-wide Consultations should be organized with Groups representing the Urban Poor, Dalits, Adivasis, Youth, Women, Children, Trans-genders, Migrants, Elderly, Adolescents, Disabled, People Living with HIV/AIDS etc. Key policy recommendations submitted by these groups should be allowed under 'Stakeholders' Suggestions' on the official website of government institutions.

In moving towards a dialogic communication, the use of social media in governance allows for strengthening and making public processes transparent and accountable. Communication technologies offer several spaces for such deliberation; there is no "one communication technology fits all". Deliberative communication can range from street theatre to an electronic town hall featuring online deliberation. Communication media are such that human resourcefulness can lead to chains of expertise connecting various forms of communication media. Thus, a street performance by illiterates can be instructive as a best practice to them across the world using other technologies in which civil society organisations, international organisations, or government officials step in to interconnect people. Perhaps Friere (2000, 1970), was being overly optimistic, but he does articulate the humanistic possibility: "Faith in people is an a priori requirement for dialogue, the 'dialogical man' believes in others even before he meets them face to face. As he goes on to note, "dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence".

Substantiating the above statement, it is pertinent to reflect on some prime examples of the power of the social media. Anna Hazare had gone on 'Fast unto Death' campaign many times previously in his life, but the reach, publicity and fame that the Jan Lok Pal Bill against corruption got had to be seen to be believed. Many protests followed as the power of the social media was recognised by activists and campaigners in India and across the globe. The last two Presidential elections in the United States have witnessed similar experiences. The 2014 Lok Sabha Election in India was a Twitter Election. More recently, the election campaigns in Assam Tamil Nadu and West Bengal on social media have become an integral part of the political communication process. Since social media allows contestants/candidates to share, post and comment their views especially during elections, their direct involvement with voters ensures connectedness. This truly is the power of social media and the biggest reason is that a common man's view can reach millions today in matter of seconds. While the Government institutions and bodies devise new ways to reach out to the last person in the last village, social media and online initiatives remain one of the key ways of engaging 'wired' citizens.

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